

Testimony of Deneika M. Janski

IN OPPOSITION OF HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS BILL #6380 –

Human Services – Board of Education & Services for the Blind Proposals

The Honorable Toni Harp, The Honorable Toni Walker,

Good evening,

I understand that part of Governor Malloy's budget proposal is to split the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), consolidating the agency's Children's Services with the Department of Education, and its other divisions with the Department of Social Services.

I am afraid that these changes would be detrimental to the services the agency provides. My children, ages 6 and 4, both receive services from BESB, and have since they were babies. Both have been diagnosed with ocular albinism and both have nystagmus. They were identified by their pediatrician at the age of 3 months. After an initial eye exam, they were referred to BESB.

Both my children are receiving services from BESB. They are by no means at the extreme end of the spectrum of children and adults BESB serves. However, the services they receive have been invaluable. Without our case-worker, we would not have known where to begin. I admit that I panicked when we received the ocular albinism diagnosis - my research showed that those with ocular albinism sometimes had vision as bad as 20/400, and needed numerous assistive devices, from special glasses to magnifying apparatus. As any parent would be, I was very concerned. Our case-worker talked us through the diagnosis, what it really meant, and has worked with us since, assessing both children's vision and working with us and their teachers, providing 'best practices' to make their vision the best it can be both at home and in their schools. Each child's case-worker visits monthly, either in our home or in their school / daycare setting.

This has been one of the most valuable services – their advocacy in the schools. I live in Granby, which has a wonderful school district. Both the preschool and elementary school teachers and administration have been very accommodating; but it has been a huge asset to have a case-worker join us in 504 meetings with the schools to act as an expert neutral party, able to advocate for our children without as much emotional involvement.

Our BESB case-worker has also provided countless opportunities for our children to interact with other visually impaired children – whether it be stories at a children's museum or outings at a farm, it has been wonderful for my children to meet other children with similar (or worse)

vision abilities. It has helped them understand that they may be different, but they are not alone. These outings also give parents an opportunity meet and create their own support networks for advice or just a shoulder to lean on.

I am afraid that breaking up BESB will severely hamper the ability of the agency to serve a population in this state that is in desperate need. Their current model allows for seamless transition from preschool to school age services, and beyond into adulthood. BESB's charge to provide services to all who need them - whether those services be advocacy and guidance, educational materials, equipment such as eyeglasses or slant boards, or simply an ear to listen when the going gets tough - is likely to be lost if the agency is split up. The Department of Education does not provide direct services to clients as BESB does. The Department of Social Services does not possess the knowledge or experience in dealing with children and adults with vision impairment or blindness. Citizens, especially children, with visual impairments are some of our most vulnerable residents. They need experienced professionals who are able to provide emotional and practical assistance, as BESB has done throughout its 118 year history. It would be a disservice to the populace of Connecticut to dismantle such a caring and necessary agency.

While I do not pretend to understand the ins and outs of the full budget process, or all the elements of Governor Malloy's budget, I find it hard to believe there are not places to make cuts that will not affect services so desperately needed.

I urge you to oppose the proposed split of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted by,  
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